

VZCZCXRO5943
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK
DE RUEHRB #1974/01 2931513
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 201513Z OCT 06 ZFR
FM AMEMBASSY RABAT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5003
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUEHCL/AMCONSUL CASABLANCA 2271
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0615

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RABAT 001974

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/20/2016
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SUBJECT: POLISARIO COMMANDER READY TO BEND BUT NOT BREAK

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*****ZFR ZFR ZFR*****
THIS MESSAGE HAS BEEN CANCELLED BY THE ORIGINATOR AND WILL
BE SENT OUT WITH NEW MRN AND MCN'S.
*****ZFR ZFR ZFR*****
REF: RABAT 1963

Classified by Political Counselor Craig Karp for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

Summary

1. (C) At a Polisario "base" east of the berm separating Moroccan and Polisario forces, a Polisario Political/Military commander told an Embassy team and MINURSO commander October 12 that he and his comrades were flexible and prepared to talk, but could not compromise the Sahrawis' right to self-determination. Polcouns cautioned Commandante Ibrahim Biyadillah that MINURSO's presence should not be taken for granted indefinitely and urged the Polisario to consider direct talks with the GOM. For his part, Ibrahim asserted that the Polisario bore "no ill will toward Morocco," but warned that a MINURSO withdrawal could lead to a resumption of hostilities. End summary.

"Nothing Left but our Trousers"

2. (C) On October 12, polcouns, poloff, and army attache were brought by MINURSO Commander Maj. Gen. Kurt Mosgaard (Denmark), and his team, to visit a Polisario base in Western Sahara, in the remote and desolate area outside the Berm.

3. (C) In a meeting following a brief tour (below), Commandante Mohammed Ibrahim Biyadullah told us that the Polisario remained committed to a "democratic solution" to the conflict. "We have made many concessions... we have nothing left but our trousers... but we cannot concede the right of our people to determine their own future," he stated. Noting that the international community had successfully intervened against the will of the occupying power to resolve territorial disputes in Kuwait and East Timor, Ibrahim lamented that the UN's Baker Plan had never been implemented, despite considerable international effort and support. There had been no pressure exerted on Morocco to accept Baker's compromise, which the Polisario had endorsed.

4. (C) Ibrahim affirmed that the Polisario "still have the

patience to wait for a solution" but conceded that it was "difficult to convince my soldiers they have to wait forever." "The ceasefire is helping the Moroccans continue their violations," he stated, repeating that a "democratic and transparent referendum" could resolve the conflict once and for all. Ibrahim regretted Morocco's continued resistance to a referendum "even under terms favorable to Morocco." He described tentative talk of a Moroccan autonomy plan as "a grave mistake," and a regression to proposals aired 30 years ago. "Morocco can not just turn back the clock," he stated.

Facing the Facts

15. (C) Thanking Ibrahim for his hospitality, Polcouns noted that the USG appreciated the Polisario's willingness to make compromises, and its patience and superb discipline in strictly adhering to the ceasefire. For better or worse, Polcouns continued, the fact was that the Baker Plan has not been implemented. He urged the Polisario look forward to find a solution rather than fixate on the past. It was time to contemplate new solutions to end the stalemate that had kept his men and their families in camps and on the front line for a generation.

16. (C) At the same time, the international environment has continued to evolve, Polcouns cautioned. Given the urgency of crises elsewhere in the world, such as Lebanon, MINURSO should not be taken for granted as having an open-ended mandate. At present, Western Sahara was again an item of growing importance on the international agenda. Polcouns urged that the Polisario leadership think hard about a formula in which it might be willing to sit face to face with the GOM to work out a permanent solution. The USG has been pressing the GOM hard to come up with a credible, meaningful and detailed autonomy plan -- a plan which could be an important stepping stone to a final resolution. Direct dialogue between the GOM and the Polisario offers the best hope for a lasting solution, Polcouns affirmed, and noted that when the parties are ready, the USG was prepared to

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facilitate such talks.

"No Ill Will"

17. (C) In response, Ibrahim repeatedly pointed to indications of Moroccan bad faith. He asserted that Morocco had consistently gone back on compromises and agreements it made with the UN. It has blocked the humanitarian exchanges of families, an agreed confidence building measure. (Note: Since the meeting Morocco has agreed to re-start the flights.) He also expressed concern that the continuing Moroccan occupation has only led to oppression of the Sahrawis under their control. Why can the international community not succeed in doing anything about this? He pointed to the recently proposed trip to Layoune by a European Parliament delegation that had been blocked by the Moroccans.

18. (C) Ibrahim said "from the bottom of our hearts, we have no ill will toward the Moroccan people or the Moroccan throne... Our duty is to live together in mutual respect... but history shows that Western Sahara is not part of Morocco," adding that the Moroccan presence in Sahara "lacks legal legitimacy." Turning to MINURSO Commander Gen. Mosgaard, Ibrahim lamented that the mission had never fulfilled its mandate to conduct a referendum but added that MINURSO "has at least provided protection to the Sahrawi people." Asked by Army Attache what would happen if MINURSO departed the area, Ibrahim replied with a grave expression and without hesitation: "We would go back to war. We know how to defend ourselves. This is our fate." Polcouns briefly

countered that no one knew better than the Commandante the impossibility of a favorable military solution. Reverting to arms, even symbolically, would only worsen his people's prospects.

In the Desert: The Polisario's Second Military District

¶9. (C) The base, headquarters of the Polisario's "Second Military District" is located in Tifariti, approximately 300km east of Layoune and about 15 km north of the Mauritanian border. The base is approximately 3km from a MINURSO "team site," or forward observer base, manned by 14 multinational personnel. The MINURSO personnel at the site enjoy good relations with their Polisario neighbors. A Polisario "liaison officer" is assigned to and often present at the UN team site.

¶10. (C) The Polisario district headquarters is composed of a handful of small, spartan one story buildings on ascorched rocky rise in the midst of the desolate Saharan desert. After the formal welcome Commandante Mohammed Ibrahim Biyadillah (Note: Polisario fighters do not assume military ranks. End note.) led visitors on a tour of the site. An honor guard of roughly 50 mostly middle-aged Polisario fighters, carrying well-tended AK-47 rifles and wearing fairly new, clean and pressed battle fatigues, greeted the USG and UN visitors. Aside from the honor guard, and several vehicles with Polisario insignias, no other military personnel or equipment were in evidence.

¶11. (C) Prior to 1991, there was a small village and remnants of a Spanish district office at the site, which apparently has a source of water. The Moroccans destroyed the village in a 1991 ground-air assault, in retaliation for a Polisario attack, one of the last hostile acts before the cease fire. The Sahrawis pointed out the Spanish dispensary, noting they had left it in its half rubble state as a memorial. A short distance away lies the hulk of a destroyed Moroccan T-54 tank from 1991, another memorial.

¶12. (C) The adjacent Polisario HQ "compound" has a "museum," a pupil-less school building and an adjacent small hospital building that had just been built with funds and technical assistance from Spanish Provincial governments and NGOs. The museum's exhibit featured the remains of a Moroccan Air Force jet downed by the Polisario in the 1970s, a display of other modern and traditional weaponry, inspirational artwork by Polisario fighters and family members, and some testimonials of alleged human rights abuses of Sahrawis in Moroccan custody. There was no habitation visible. We were told that the only civilians in the district were nomads, who rotated family members in from the Tindouf camps. A few Polisario fighters" apparently stay the site and in outposts between the village and the berm.

¶13. (C) After our meeting, following a break at the team site, we were brought back to the very same compound, this

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time to meet an international Humanitarian Demining NGO, who were the real occupants of the "school" buildings, an in-kind contribution to their effort from the Polisario. They were in the initial stages of a mine survey, and eventual clearance project for areas on the "Polisario" side of the berm.

Leadership Note

¶14. (C) Ibrahim told polcouns that he would report the content of our discussions directly to Mohammed Abdel Aziz, President of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (RASD). Responding to questions about the Polisario's leadership

structure, Ibrahim told us that in addition to President Abdel Aziz (who is also Secretary-General of the Polisario, the overall liberation movement, a position he has held since 1976), the Polisario is guided by a 36 member National Secretariat, the supreme decision-making body elected by a

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larger General Popular Congress, which is convened every four years. Ibrahim said he was a member of this Secretariat, but not part of the 4-5 person inner cabinet around Abdel Aziz.

Comment

¶15. (C) A field commander and a political figure in the Polisario Movement, Ibrahim appeared somewhat flexible, perhaps born of a visible weariness of the prospect of an entire lifetime in camp or in the desert. MINURSO considers him a moderate, at least compared to his &hot head& colleagues in the southern districts. Although he repeatedly spoke about a referendum, Ibrahim insisted only on self-determination. He did not appear to condition his own readiness for talks with the Moroccans. He made clear however his lack of confidence in the Kingdom, this will likely have to rise if talks were to go forward. As a result, there is no reason to believe that he would accept a take-it-or leave it fait accompli. ((I am going to far in this))

¶16. (C) Clearly a politician, Ibrahim did not appear to be looking at present to go back to war, and neither did his troops. Their sharp dress but unthreatening overall mien suggests to our relatively untrained eyes that they may be being sustained (by Algeria) to keep up appearances, but not much more. (See reftel on MINURSO for additional military assessment.)

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Riley